

August 22, 2007: Mac Thornberry Editorial "Let The Truth Lead The Way In Iraq"

Recently, I was one of the House and Senate members asked to go to the Pentagon for a classified briefing from General Petraeus and Ambassador Crocker in Baghdad. As I walked out of the tunnel-like hallways in the basement of the Pentagon, I was struck by the contrast between the factual report I had just heard and the debate going on in Congress. It was truly two different worlds.

Not that the news from Baghdad was all positive. It was not. There were areas where clear, significant progress is being made, and there were other areas that have been disappointing. But that report was based on the facts on the ground. The debate in Congress seems to be based on something else.

Henry Kissinger recently wrote "Vietnam and Iraq are different conflicts in different times, but there is an important similarity: A point was reached during the Vietnam War when the domestic debate became so bitter as to preclude rational discussion of hard choices." My biggest concern is that we are approaching a point in the debate on Iraq where facts no longer matter.

Take a moment to think about what that means. Political partisanship and passions get so inflamed that rational decision making is not possible. Positions get so locked-in that no amount of evidence can change someone's mind. Decisions are based not on truth, but on politics, emotions, and what someone wants the truth to be.

There are ominous signs. Once it became clear last month that there were not enough votes to force our troops to leave Iraq, the Senate Majority Leader took the entire Defense Authorization Bill off of the floor. If his position on Iraq was not going to prevail, he would not permit there to be any defense bill at all for the first time in 45 years. In the House, staff strains their imaginations to come up with new ways to vote on the Iraq issue every week. The impact of these acts on what the troops are trying to accomplish are brushed aside.

Of course, the danger of ignoring facts can apply to both sides in the Iraq debate. Just as there are those who pronounced the new strategy a failure before it was ever tried, there may be those who resist change even when a different course makes sense. Those of us who believe the strategy should be given a chance must be willing to objectively consider any evidence that it is not working. But the key is to be open to the facts, not locked into a partisan position.

General Petraeus and Ambassador Crocker reported that all of the troops needed to implement their new strategy have been in place only since mid-June. The planned increase of civilians to help with reconstruction is only about one-half complete. There has been a remarkable turn-around in some provinces that had been seen as lost but were now rejecting Al Qaeda foreign fighters. Sectarian deaths have been dramatically reduced while the more spectacular vehicle bombings have gotten most of the attention. On the other hand, the government of Iraq is moving too slowly to pass the reforms needed for reconciliation and rebuilding.

Of course, Al Qaeda is expert at using the media for their own purposes. It was recently revealed that the top Iraqi in the organization never really existed. He was a fictitious character invented for the media. Our soldiers have learned that the truck bombs we hear about are carefully placed in locations where the American media is sure to cover it. Innocent lives are expendable to terrorists.

Iraq is a pivotal piece in the increasingly complex war on terrorism. General Petraeus will come back to Washington in mid-September to report on where we are and what the prospects are for success. We should all expect that his report will again include some good news, some not-so-good. Will we be able to listen to his professional military judgment objectively, or are the bitterness and divisions too deep?

There are well-intentioned people on both sides of the debate, and there are clearly no simple answers. That is why we must stay focused on the facts, put partisanship aside, and let the truth lead the way.